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What Can Be Done To Safeguard African Elephant Populations From Further Decline?

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Abstract

The African elephant (*Loxodonta Africana*), the largest land mammal on earth is also one of the most endangered wildlife species in Africa. Its population has rapidly declined in numbers due to poaching for its ivory and loss of habitat as a result of increasing human populations. Studies have been carried out and several books and articles have been written highlighting the plight of the African elephant and suggesting ways to save the elephant. However this has not been without controversy because of major differences in opinion. This article brings together the different opinions with a view to finding out if any one of them points the best way forward to safeguard existing elephant populations. It also highlights the unanswered questions that arise in the quest to save the elephant populations from further decline.

Keywords: elephant; ivory; poaching; natural habitat; conservation; CITES

1. Introduction

The African elephant population is rapidly declining due to poaching and illegal ivory trade driven by the worldwide demand for ivory.

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A meeting of world bodies in 2013 in Nairobi noted that "Populations of elephants in Africa continue to be under severe threat as the illegal trade in ivory grows, with double the numbers of elephants killed and triple the amounts of ivory seized over the past decade... An estimated 17 000 African elephants were illegally killed in 2011... Large-scale seizures of ivory (consignments of more than 800kg) destined for Asia have more than doubled since 2009... Large movements of ivory that comprise the tusks of hundreds of elephants in a single shipment are indicative of the increasingly active grip of highly organised criminal networks" [1].

Its natural habitat is also being threatened by human populations. The rapid human-population increase in many African countries is expected to continue, posing a serious threat to elephants' natural habitats. "When elephants lose their ranges they die," says Ian Parker, a former ivory merchant. In recent years, the African elephants' range has shrunk to less than a quarter of the continent's surface, and further reduction of that range is likely [2].

In answering the question on the future of the African elephant, this article examines the differing views presented on how to save the African elephant based on studies carried out. It will also examine whether there is one answer to the question of how to save the African elephant.

2. The basis of differences in opinion

A lot has been said and written about saving the African elephant. The danger to the African elephant primarily comes from poaching and human encroachment. As a result of these, the elephant population has been reduced from 1,300,000 in 1979 to 609,000 in 1989 [3]. According to one report, 25,000 are being killed annually for their tusks [4]. The report goes on to say that unless something is done by 2025 there will be no wild herds left. This has resulted in two opposing sides with a view to saving the elephant population. There are those who say that a total ban on the ivory trade estimated at \$1billion [5] is the only way to save the elephant. However on the opposing side are those who say that a ban on the ivory trade has not stopped the elephant from being poached. So if trade in endangered species could be made legal and controlled it may save the elephant in the long run.

Those who argue for the total ban of ivory trade cite as an example the time when there was a total ban by CITES on the trade of ivory (in 1989 CITES signatories banned all international trade in ivory). As a result of that demand for ivory reduced and elephant numbers increased. However when the ban was partially lifted it led to an increased killing of elephants for their tusks. Therefore the solution is to totally ban any trade in ivory [6].

On the opposing side are those who argue for controlled trade in ivory. Some examples can be drawn from Botswana, Zimbabwe and Namibia. These are countries where the trade in endangered species has been partially allowed. According to these Southern African countries their elephant populations are growing and not falling (80,000 in Botswana, over 60,000 in Zimbabwe and 7,000 in Namibia)[7]leading to increased human wildlife conflict. The argument these countries put forward to CITES was that for these animals to survive they have to be able to pay for their survival. For example if the ivory already there as a result of these animals being illegally poached or dying of natural causes could be sold and money raised and put into conservation then this would help save the elephant population. Another way to raise money for the conservation of these animals

would be through legal or trophy hunting. This is where permits are issued at a cost for hunting and killing elephants in a regulated way. This would be for example as a way of culling which occurs when an animal population has grown more than the area it is located can handle. Also by making ivory more available through legal trade, the cost of selling it (which is estimated at around US\$200 per kilo on the black market) would be greatly reduced and as a result it would reduce the desire for poaching. Of course these arguments also have their own issues. For example will money raised through legal sell of ivory actually be put back into conservation?

Then there are those who argue that more than just conservation efforts are needed to save the elephants. That survival of the elephant and other endangered species is also tied to other aspects like political stability and zero tolerance of corruption in a country. Again look at South Africa, Namibia and Uganda. During the time of political instability in these countries in the 1970s, large elephant populations and in Uganda the Rhino population were decimated or wiped out. However since these countries are now more stable the threat to these animal populations has reduced. The following example can be used to illustrate this further.

In Zimbabwe, it has been reported that the rate of illegal killing of elephants is on the rise with 300 elephants reported killed in Hwange National Park. With Zimbabwe under sanctions from western powers some Zimbabweans with close ties to the ruling party are looking for new sources of money and they may be turning to the highly valued ivory tusks [8].

More alarming is the way money from illegal ivory trade is being used to fund criminal activities much like blood diamonds were used to fund brutal wars in Sierra Leone. Militia groups like the Janjaweed in Sudan and warlords in Somalia are cited in the use of illegal ivory trade to fund their private armies [9].

However the question still remaining to be answered is, what future is there for the African elephant if it can be saved from illegal ivory trade? There still remains the issue of human wildlife conflict. In many African communities the elephant is viewed as a pest because it destroys farms that are used to plant food. The growing human population poses a threat to the elephant. Elephants need large tracts of land to survive because they cover a large number of kilometers in their search for food. However with the growing human population, areas where elephants once roamed freely are being taken over by humans who are settling and cultivating in these areas. Elephants will still come to these places and destroy crops by trampling and feeding on them. They will also feed on harvested grain stacked in the field for drying or even raid grain stores in the process destroying storage places[10]. Thus the hatred for these animals and the communities would rather kill these elephants which they see as a threat to their economic livelihood.

For example in Mount Kenya National Park and Aberdare National Park in Kenya hungry elephants often venture out of the park and wreak havoc on surrounding farms. Officials there often receive complaints from aggrieved villagers and farmers. Experiments are under way by Kenya Wildlife Service scientists using birth control vaccines to render female elephants sterile and thus reduce elephant population numbers in those areas [11]. This is just one example that illustrates the human wildlife conflict taking place.

Lastly is the idea that coexistence with wildlife is possible and is the only way of saving the elephant from extinction. According to Dr Western, a former Chairman of the African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group, coexistence between humans and wildlife, which is essential for the survival of the earth's biodiversity, is achievable [12] According to Western, animal species cannot survive on their own in protected areas like National Parks. "National Parks far from saving species could become extinction traps if ecologically isolated from human activity."

3. Conclusion

Reaching a conclusion on how to save the African elephant is difficult because of the many parties involved, their differing opinions and the many issues that arise. How do you get farmers to stop viewing elephants as pests? How committed are governments in Africa and globally in the fight to save the African elephant? And more than just having the will in the fight to save the African elephant, do they have the resources?

As the debate rages on one issue still needs to be addressed. If land can only hold so many elephants and because of successful protection there numbers outgrow what the land can hold then what should be done? A case in point is in Namibia, where there were a total of 80,000 elephants in an area that could hold only 50,000. Should nature be allowed to take its course and the elephants possible die out until only populations that the land can hold are allowed to survive?

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